



A problem SHARED

Veterinarians carry a load of responsibility, but it's possible to share the weight by involving clients as true partners in deciding a treatment plan. Veterinarian **Liza Schneider**, Director of Holistic Vets, outlines the benefits to veterinarian wellbeing from making effective use of informed consent.

BEING A VETERINARIAN carries immense responsibility. Animals in our care represent our clients' livelihoods and emotional needs, with the latter becoming increasingly the case as our society evolves to value animals and the benefits they bring to our lives. Pleasing our clients and meeting their needs is a very important part of practice, but it can be challenging, highly stressful and sometimes impossible – for example, when we have to advocate for an animal's

welfare and their needs are at odds with the client's needs.

In clinical practice, our work as veterinarians doesn't always follow a predictable path of black-and-white diagnoses and consistent responses to treatment. We all know that biological systems can be unpredictable, and we frequently have to navigate difficult situations where there has been an adverse or unexpected event associated with our medical and/or surgical intervention.

When we practise with an approach that dictates a strategy, rather than explaining the situation and outlining options for our client, it places us in the position of carrying all the responsibility for the outcome. That can be incredibly stressful, especially when things go wrong. While a good veterinarian takes responsibility for their actions, it can be of substantial benefit to share this responsibility with your client by having them contribute to the decision-making process.

Consider the following scenario. A young cat comes in for treatment of an abscess. It is draining relatively well, and although there is some pain and inflammation, the cat otherwise appears to be in good health. After completing a clinical examination to ensure there are no other obvious health issues, there are several pathways that we may pursue, and sequelae to these. Here are some examples:

You provide NSAIDs as pain relief, clean the area and recommend that the owner continues this to facilitate further drainage. What are the potential outcomes?

- » The cat heals uneventfully.
- » The infection progresses and the cat becomes debilitated needing additional treatment.
- » Renal disease ensues following the use of a NSAID.

In addition to the above, you prescribe antibiotics. Potential outcomes:

- » The cat heals uneventfully.
- » A gastrointestinal upset develops as a side effect of the antibiotics.
- » The skin heals with a recurrence of the abscess and surgery is recommended.

Or it may be that the cat is admitted for a general anaesthetic, lancing of the abscess, exploration for a foreign body, flushing and the placement of a drain. Options such as pre-anaesthetic blood tests and fluid support are discussed and the client elects these. The potential outcomes include:

- » A concurrent pathology is identified with blood testing. It's decided that an anaesthetic will pose more risk, and a conservative approach is pursued.
- » The cat dies unexpectedly under anaesthetic.
- » The cat heals uneventfully.
- » Surgery goes well and a drain is placed, but two days later the cat pulls out half the drain and further surgery is needed to retrieve the other half.
- » The cat heals from this abscess, but a few days later another abscess erupts. Because the owner has spent what to them is a large sum of money to

have the initial abscess surgically addressed, they decide to not seek veterinary input. The second abscess heals with no intervention, and the owner is angry that they spent so much money initially when the original abscess may also have healed without surgery.

With each of these treatment options comes risk, with the worst-case scenario being that the cat dies unexpectedly under anaesthetic. This is always a distressing outcome and often compromises our emotional wellbeing, especially if we have made the decision to operate without giving due consideration to a more conservative approach and without presenting the option to the owner. Additionally, managing our clients' expectations can be very challenging, and it can take its toll if they are disappointed or angry when things don't go to plan.

Our patients' needs must always come first, but the outcomes of our interventions can rarely be guaranteed. Although we may truly believe that a treatment option is in the best interests of our patient, or that it is the gold standard approach clinically, there are usually more factors to consider. These often become apparent when we allow the client to have input and we listen to their needs, which may include financial constraints, inability to confine or monitor the patient, difficulty medicating their animal, a disability prohibiting some aspects of home care, or a fear of anaesthetics or surgery because they have lost another pet this way.

One invaluable tool to help us navigate a way forward that is in the best interests of the animal and owner is informed consent. For optimal results, this process is performed by presenting options to our clients in an honest, understandable and unbiased manner (not condescending), referencing the welfare needs of the animal, outlining the pros and cons of each option, and applying consideration, science and common sense.

It's not always easy to cover every detail and to communicate effectively

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with all clients, but by following this process we show that we care about our patients' and clients' needs. Our clients then feel that their input is valued, and a relationship of mutual respect and good faith generally ensues. A spinoff is that we are more likely to be trusted and valued for the service that we provide.

Additionally, having this conversation gives us an opportunity to understand our clients' needs, and therefore to be better equipped to manage their expectations. It also allows us to educate and empower our clients, as they help determine the best course of action for their pet and become partners in the decision-making process, thereby sharing responsibility for the outcome. If things do go wrong, our client is fully informed and has elected this course of action, alleviating a considerable load of responsibility that we may have otherwise carried entirely ourselves.

When we successfully meet (and ideally exceed) our clients' expectations and improve the health of our patients with a high standard of care, it feels great! Next time you have a dilemma about what is best for your patients, don't forget informed consent, a very valuable tool to help improve client and job satisfaction, as well as help to grow us into a profession that is genuinely trusted and valued. 